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SUBJECT: FORMER HOWARD MINISTER ON RUDD, POLITICS, AND  
INDIGENOUS AFFAIRS

REF: 07 CANBERRA 956

Classified By: Ambassador Robert D. McCallum for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

11. (C/NF) SUMMARY: Former Howard Government Indigenous Affairs Minister Mal Brough, who has just been elected president of the Liberal Party in Queensland, told the Ambassador June 25 that complaints of overcentralization in the Prime Minister's office reflected the natural tendency of fellow Queenslander Kevin Rudd to control the process of governing, something he had also done when he ran the Queensland state government. Commenting on the leadership of the Liberal Party, he said that it was clear the public had made up its mind about Brendan Nelson and his approval rating was unlikely to improve. Malcolm Turnbull cared only about Turnbull and his attempts to undermine Nelson's leadership had cost him support in the Liberal Party. Brough noted that he was in the middle of negotiations regarding the merger of the Liberal and National Parties in Queensland. He favored the merger but it was still unclear if it would take place. On indigenous issues, Brough lamented the fact that the process he had begun with the intervention a year ago seemed to be going backward. Rudd, he said, was not seriously committed to helping the indigenous. END SUMMARY

12. (C/NF) Brough met with the Ambassador in Canberra on June 125. He had been the federal MP for the seat of Longman, in the Northern suburbs of Brisbane, from 1996 until last November's federal election. Brough said he knew more than a year before the election that he would lose his seat to the Australian Labor Party (ALP) candidate but that he and John Howard had decided he was the Liberal Party's best chance. In 2006, former Prime Minister John Howard appointed him Minister for Families, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs. In June 2007, after receiving a report of rampant child abuse on indigenous communities in the Northern Territories (called "The Little Children are Sacred" see reftel), Brough convinced Howard to order the federal government to intervene in the indigenous communities in the Northern Territories (NT). Brough withdrew from politics for several months after his election defeat but stayed actively involved in indigenous affairs. In May, he was elected President of the Queensland Liberal Party and is currently negotiating a merger of the Liberal and National Parties in Queensland.

RUDD THE CONTROLLER

13. (C/NF) Commenting on fellow Queenslander Kevin Rudd's governing style, Brough said that the Prime Minister's office will continue to centralize the decision-making process. Rudd had been obsessed with controlling the governing process in Queensland when he worked for Premier Wayne Goss and he was continuing that style in Canberra. Brough noted that the press gallery had already turned against Rudd and the senior public service was "livid." Brough recounted that senior public servants he had talked to complained they would get requests at 6:30am to deliver a report at 7:30am and then

never hear another word on the subject. However, Brough agreed that Rudd's popularity with the voting public remains high. Brough predicted that the public will realize what Rudd is like in 12-18 months and his popularity would fall. The Liberal Party could take advantage of this, Brough maintained, if it could straighten out its leadership situation.

#### LIBERAL PARTY LEADERSHIP

¶4. (C/NF) Brough said he thought Liberal Party Leader Brendan Nelson was a good man but unfortunately, the public had not warmed up to him. Some politicians, like former Australian Labor Party (ALP) leaders Kim Beazley and Simon Crean and now Malcolm Turnbull had lost support in the Coalition parliamentary caucus, Brough stated.

Turnbull was only interested in Turnbull and his constant undermining of Nelson had hurt him in the eyes of many of his colleagues. Some in the Liberal caucus supported Turnbull as Leader only because they wanted to put him in a position to fail, Brough declared. He thought that Turnbull would become Opposition Leader at some point in the future and would land some blows on the Government as Leader but he predicts Turnbull would ultimately fail. The public support for Costello returning as Leader, Brough noted, was likely a reflection of concern about the economy. He said he had seen Costello recently and even though they were good friends, Costello refused to reveal his future intentions. Brough opined that he thought Costello's chance and desire to be Leader had passed.

#### LIBERAL-NATIONAL MERGER HANGS IN THE BALANCE

¶5. (C/NF) Brough told the Ambassador the merger between the Liberal and National parties in Queensland was not yet settled. National Party Leader Lawrence Springborg and some of the state party officials, he said, did not understand what they needed to do and they regarded Brough as a potential rival. For example, one merger proposal called for all current National and Liberal Party incumbents to keep their seats for one term. A new right-of-center, merged party could only succeed if it presented itself as something new, Brough explained. What kind of message did this incumbency policy send about renewal? Brough noted that the negotiations through this weekend would be decisive. Ballots on the merger were due from Liberal Party members by Monday and he would be announcing the result on Tuesday.

#### THE NATIONAL PARTY IS FINISHED

¶6. (C/NF) A merger in Queensland was essential, Brough declared, because the National Party could not win any seats in Southeast Queensland. The people from Sydney and Melbourne who had moved to Queensland recognized only the Liberal Party and the ALP as political brands. The National Party meant nothing to them, he said. If you looked at the National's federal MPs, they were mostly over 60. Once they left, the Liberal Party or the ALP would win their seats. In the near future, Brough predicted, the Nationals would have less than five seats in Parliament, and no longer be a recognized party. Brough said a federal merger would also make sense but the best chance for success was this year (presumably because of the likely Queensland merger and the policy review currently being conducted by both Coalition parties).

#### INDIGENOUS INTERVENTION

¶7. (C/NF) Brough lamented what he said was the flagging federal government commitment to the NT intervention. Rudd and Indigenous Affairs Minister Jenny Macklin did not know what to do, he maintained. Rudd had issued the apology to the indigenous in Australia, but he had yet to visit an aboriginal community (NOTE: Rudd has visited a community in New South Wales but none in the Northern Territories). Children were healthier and going to school, Brough noted,

but the concept of school was still alien to many in the communities. Meanwhile, the Government of South Australia had received a report on child sexual abuse as damning as the "Little Children are Sacred" report and neither it nor the federal government had responded (NOTE: the April 2008 report by former state Supreme Court judge Ted Mullighan). Brough said he was working with members of the indigenous community in South Australia to get them to identify for the police the pedophiles and sexual predators.

18. (C/NF) COMMENT: Brough is a staunch member of the Liberal Party so he is unlikely to make flattering comments about Rudd and the ALP. On the other hand, Brough, like Rudd, is from Queensland so he may know the Prime Minister better than most other commentators. His comments on the Liberal Party track what we have heard from other sources. Rudd and Macklin have in fact adopted much of the Howard Government's intervention in the NT, although their approach appears to be more cautious and consultative. Brough is extremely popular in Queensland, and, if he eventually returns to federal politics, it will be good news for a Liberal Party that will need to win some of the Queensland seats that local boys Rudd and Treasurer Wayne Swan helped the ALP win in 2007.

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